

Assessment of Young Children

Young children are notoriously difficult to assess accurately, and well-intended testing efforts in the past have done unintended harm.

National Education Goals Panel, 1998

Good assessment is an important, integral part of good teaching. Assessment practices must be appropriate for young children and must be intended for the purpose of ultimately benefiting children's learning and well-being. High-stakes accountability testing of individual children is not appropriate before the end of third grade.

The current climate which demands greater accountability and enhanced educational performance, presents teachers and administrators with decisions about how to implement assessments that are appropriate for young children, and at the same time, responsive to the legitimate demands from parents and the public for clear and useful information. Knowledge about assessment and the unique development of young children is essential for making the right decisions.

Group-Administered Standardized Achievement Tests—As evaluation tools for young children, achievement tests are not adequate for showing how or what students are learning, the kinds of help they need, or the quality of teaching they receive. Group-administered, standardized achievement tests often fail to measure much more than children's test-taking ability, and *should not be used to make important educational decisions about young children.*

Assessment and the Unique Development of Young Children

Assessing children in the earliest years of life—from birth to age 8—is difficult because it is the period when young children's rates of physical, motor, and linguistic development outpace growth rates at all other stages. Growth is rapid, episodic, and highly influenced by environmental supports: nurturing parents, quality care-giving, and the learning setting.

Because young children learn in ways and at rates different from older children and adults, we must tailor our assessments accordingly. Because young children come to know things through doing as well as through listening, and because they often represent their knowledge better by showing than by talking or writing, paper-and-pencil tests are not adequate. Because young children do not have the experience to understand what the goals of formal testing are, testing interactions may be very difficult or impossible to structure appropriately. Because young children develop and learn so fast, tests given at one point in time may not give a complete picture of learning. And because young children's achievements at any point are the result of a complex mix of their ability to learn and past learning opportunities, it is a mistake to interpret measures of past learning as evidence of what could be learned.

For these reasons, how we assess young children and the principles that frame such assessments need special attention. What works for older children or adults will not work for younger children; they have unique needs that we, as adults, are obliged to recognize if we are to optimize their development.

Source: Shepard, L. A., Kagan, S. L., & Wurtz (Eds). (1998)

In order to help young children learn, assessment must be a part of the regular classroom program in which teachers who know the children are the primary assessors. Standardized, multiple-choice achievement tests are developed by large publishing companies that have no connection to local curricula and are not accountable to local communities. By eliminating the use of standardized tests for evaluating students and using appropriate methods instead, we can significantly improve the quality of education for young children (Fair Test, 1991).

Screening and Diagnostic Assessment—Screening and developmental assessments are used for referral and identifying disabilities and special needs of children. The purpose of identification is to provide follow-up intervention with appropriate health, educational, and special services to ensure that children benefit from support for optimum growth and learning.

Screening assessments are intended to be used only for referral purposes, and should never be used for making instructional decisions, to identify children for special education, or to show growth across time. In-depth, diagnostic testing must be administered by trained specialists, and the results must always be considered within the context of multiple sources of evidence from multiple settings. Follow-up services and educational experiences must be carefully coordinated among teachers, parents, administrators, and service providers.

Harmful Effects of High-stakes Assessment—As a result of inappropriate uses of assessment instruments, or use of a single test to make “high-stakes” decision, all too often children are tracked into high or low ability groups, retained at grade level, placed in extra-year classes, or screened out of “regular” classes and mislabeled or sorted into “special” classes. Such practices are not beneficial to children, and indeed are more often harmful to them (Meisels, 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz (Eds.). National Education Goals Panel, 1998).

Furthermore, in some instances, high-stakes tests are used to determine school rankings and merit pay for teachers. If tests play a significant role in grade advancement and are the primary basis for school’s so-called accountability, teachers feel compelled to spend considerable time preparing children to take tests. In such cases, the tests consume much of the school curriculum. Valuable instructional time is lost in preparing for tests by reading isolated paragraphs and answering multiple-choice questions. Opportunities for higher level thinking are lost when time is spent not on posing problems for which math might be used, and not in the process of coming to a natural understanding of math concepts, but on reviewing skills such as addition, subtraction, and division—all in isolation. Decisions about instruction and assessment must be made in the context of supporting learning for all students (Perrone, 1991).

Making Decision About Testing and Other Assessments—Teachers must make instructional decisions based on their understanding of each child’s learning needs and how to best support each child. This requires ongoing assessment and evaluation through
1) observation of process,

2) observation of products, and 3) communication and interaction among teachers, children, and their families. Good instructional decisions are dependent on teachers' knowledge and skills in assessment and evaluation to support optimum learning for every child. (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Hohman & Weikart, 1995; Meisels, Jablon, et al., 1994; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991; NASBE, 1988; NAECS/SDE, 2000; Stiggins, 1997, 1999).

Administrators of early childhood programs who consider the use of standardized tests must ask themselves how children will benefit from testing. Why is testing to be done? Does an appropriate test exist? What other sources of information can be used to make decisions about how best to provide instruction and services for an individual child? How can information about student progress be best collected and most clearly reported to parents, the board, and the community? In answering such questions, administrators should apply principles of meaningful assessment and evaluation grounded in knowledge about how children develop and learn.

In order to avoid inappropriate interpretations and uses of assessment, a clear understanding about different types of assessment and their different purposes is essential. Keeping in mind that "well-intended testing efforts in the past have done unintended harm," school administrators, teachers, and governing boards must not lose sight of considering the ultimate benefit to children's learning and well-being.

(Note: In Nebraska, screening/readiness testing in connection with entrance to kindergarten is prohibited and group-administered, norm-referenced standardized tests are prohibited below Grade 2.)

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